ASIA’S MIDDLE POWERS?

The Identity and Regional Policy of South Korea and Vietnam

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9 Unhappy Nations: The Evolution of Modern Korea and Vietnam

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This chapter aims to identify and compare the major patterns of modern national and state evolution in Korea and Vietnam. Korea and Vietnam are located in the same geographical neighborhood. Both are (much) smaller neighbors of China and historically existed within the premodern Sinocentric cultural and political world. Premodern developments created an ethnically more homogeneous and politically more stable Korea than Vietnam. Their fates further diverged in the late nineteenth century, despite apparent similarities. Korea was colonized by a fellow Asian country (Japan) and Vietnam by a faraway Western one (France). Korea became a colony decades later than Vietnam, and was ruled under a unified administration. In contrast, Vietnam was broken up into three administrative zones under different laws. While both countries were divided during the Cold War into communist and anti-communist states, Vietnam was reunified under communist rule after a long and extremely violent war. The North Korean communist state also attempted to reunify the country by force, but failed after three years of savage fighting. South Korea eventually became a rich and democratic country in contrast to poor and authoritarian North Korea and Vietnam.

Interestingly, both Vietnam and South Korea have seen a strong resurgence of nationalism in the post–Cold War period. It is understandable that a still-divided Korea frustrates many South Koreans, but why has a reunified Vietnam failed to satisfy Vietnamese patriots? The irony implied in the comparison between Vietnam and South Korea today brings to mind Leo Tolstoy's famous remark: "Happy families are all alike; every unhappy family is unhappy in its own way."
Korea and Vietnam's tortuous path to modernity might well have something to do with their "middle-power" status. Both countries are of medium size and situated between great powers. While Vietnam lies between India and China, Korea shares land or maritime borders with China, Russia, and Japan. Both Vietnam and Korea are across the Pacific Ocean from the United States. Their middle-power status makes them both geopolitically worthy for the great powers to fight over. At the same time, they themselves are big enough to dare to challenge the great powers, or—to use Donald Kelsy's metaphor in the introductory chapter of this volume—to "punch well above their weights." Barely emerging from colonial rule, both Korea and Vietnam found themselves exactly where the Iron Curtain fell, which was not entirely a coincidence. U.S. military intervention in both countries was similarly not a coincidence. Both the Korean War (1950–53) and the Vietnam War (1965–73) were fought not only to contain the Soviet Bloc but also to protect the United States from facing communism on its borders. Lacking military capability but not ambitions, both North Korea and North Vietnam at that time chose to challenge the boundary imposed on them by the superpowers. Their pride at being outposts of the socialist bloc and their bravado in standing up to the United States showed elements of middle-power behavior.

This chapter will be divided into three main parts. Following a brief discussion of premodern history, the first part concerns the development of modern national consciousness in Korea and Vietnam since the nineteenth century. In the second part I compare the process of modern state building in North Vietnam and South Korea. The literature on the political system of North Vietnam is scarce, and I will use primary data from an ongoing research project. In the conclusion, I discuss the lessons of Vietnamese reunification for South Korea. While Koreans in divided Korea may look to unified Vietnam with envy, they should be aware of the cost of Vietnamese-style reunification, which does not seem to have improved the lot of most Vietnamese.

Premodern Korea and Vietnam

Vietnamese and Korean relations to China in premodern times followed a similar course of initial subjugation and later independence. Today's Vietnam originated as a tribal society in the Red River Delta. This society fell under Chinese rule in 111 BCE and remained so until the tenth century. During this period, significant Chinese migration and intermarriage took place. Chinese customs were absorbed, although the local culture retained certain distinguishable elements. After regaining political independence in 938 CE, Vietnamese kings maintained a tributary relationship with China. They successfully resisted several invasions from the north, such as the Mongolian invasions in the thirteenth century. For two decades, from 1400 to 1418, however, Vietnam fell under (Ming) Chinese direct rule, but regained independence afterward. While the nationalist scholarship makes much of Vietnam's "heroic resistance" against Chinese aggression, the premodern relationship between China and Vietnam was fundamentally peaceful, and periods of war were rare.

Korea was also subject to direct Chinese rule from 108 BCE to the fourth century CE—only 400 years instead of 1,000 years as in Vietnam. Following the collapse of Chinese rule was the Three Kingdoms period of 300 years, during which three centralized kingdoms—Koguryo, Paekche, and Silla—competed for domination of the peninsula. Silla first collaborated with China to defeat its "Korean" rivals, then later drove China out in 676. The subsequent tributary relationship between a unified Korea and China was marked by occasional conflicts, as between Vietnam and China. Korean rulers also resisted many Chinese invasions, but fell under Mongol rule in 1270–1356.

Vietnamese history after independence from China in the tenth century was marked by much greater disunity and political turmoil than Korean history. Korea was unified in the seventh century, never expanded its territory further, and underwent three dynasties before being annexed to Japan in 1910. In contrast, Vietnam's territory gradually expanded to the south from the Red River Delta, conquering the Hindu Champa Kingdom (today's central Vietnam) during the twelfth to the fifteenth centuries and the eastern part of the Hindu/Buddhist Khmer Empire (today's southern Vietnam) during the sixteenth to the eighteenth centuries. Most of the territory of today's Vietnam did not belong to it five centuries ago. During the sixteenth to the eighteenth centuries Vietnam witnessed two civil wars, first between the Mac and Le houses (1527–92), then between Northern Trinh, Southern Nguyen, and Tay Son lords (1627–1802). Together, the wars lasted 240 years—about the same length of time as the Three Kingdoms period in Korea a millennium ago. What Silla achieved territorially in 676, the Nguyen dynasty (the ninth or tenth dynasty after Vietnam's independence from China) achieved only in 1802.

Socially, an important difference between premodern Korea and Vietnam was the less hierarchical society of Vietnam. Vietnamese rulers were more successful than their Korean counterparts in eliminating the aristocracy, which they more or less accomplished by the fifteenth century. Nguyen's Vietnam appeared more centralized than Yi's Korea, where the yangban (aristocrats) formed a powerful group rival to kings.
Culturally, Vietnam, like Korea, was deeply influenced by Buddhism, Confucianism, and neo-Confucianism. As late as the nineteenth century, traditional Vietnamese elites still did not imagine or define their world in ethnic terms (that is, Vietnamese versus Chinese) but in cultural ones as “domains of manifest civility.” This world contained political boundaries but was united under a single cultural framework that centered on the “Northern Kingdom” (today’s China) and to which “southerners” (today’s Vietnamese) yearned to belong. As in Korea, borrowing Chinese political concepts and institutions helped Vietnamese rulers consolidate their rule, and they were proud of being part of the Sinocentric cultural universe.

Rise of the Modern Nation in Korea and Vietnam

Compared to Korea, Vietnam’s geographic location exposed it to far more interaction with foreigners. Europeans were involved in Vietnam’s civil wars from the sixteenth century. Facing Vietnam’s rejection of its overtures for trade and missionary activities, France defeated Nguyen forces to occupy southern Vietnam in the 1860s. After a series of brief confrontations, the Nguyen king accepted French protectorates over the rest of the country in 1884. Until the end of the nineteenth century, Vietnamese mandarins who refused to accept defeat were busy organizing armed struggles to restore the monarchy. Modern national consciousness did not emerge until the 1900s, thanks mostly to intellectuals in exile in Japan and China (for example, Phan Boi Chau) whose work had only limited impact inside Vietnam.

In contrast, Korea was much more isolated when the imperialist age began in East Asia. Like Vietnam, it resisted foreign pressure from the United States, France, and Japan to open up the country for trade. No foreign powers were particularly interested in colonizing Korea except Japan, who was not yet strong enough. In 1894 Japan defeated China and in 1905 it defeated Russia, both wars fought because of Korea. While Korea would eventually become a Japanese colony in 1910, the delay (compared to Vietnam) allowed Korean intellectuals to develop and spread a modern national consciousness while Korea was still independent. The most important work was done by the Independence Club during 1896–98. This club was organized by Philip Jaisson (So Chae-p’II), a Protestant Korean intellectual who had obtained an American medical degree and U.S. citizenship before returning to Korea. The threat to Korea from Japan, a non-Western and anti-Christian power, made Protestantism appealing to Koreans. In contrast, Christianity’s presence in colonial Vietnam was mainly through the Catholic Church and was associated with the colonial power. Far from contributing to Vietnamese modern national consciousness, it frequently was a target of nationalist sentiment. For this reason, the March 1, 1919, movement in Korea—in which the Protestant Church played an important role—would have been unthinkable in Vietnam.

In response to the March 1 movement, in which tens of thousands protested nationwide, Japan relaxed political control in Korea. This policy (to be discontinued in 1931) resulted from the rise of democracy in Japan itself (“Taisho democracy”) and from the aspirations of Japanese elites to emulate the West. From 1920 to 1925 Korea witnessed the birth of a vibrant movement for cultural reform. A similar liberal policy was not implemented in Vietnam until 1936 (and lasted only until 1939), when the Popular Front came to power in France. Since a freer press and greater freedom of organization facilitated a stronger modern national consciousness, Korea was a decade or two ahead of Vietnam. An open organization like Sin’ganhoe (1927–31), which was tolerated by the Japanese colonial government and whose membership included both nationalists and communists, would have been possible in Vietnam only in the late 1930s, and then only in southern Vietnam (for reasons to be explained later).

During the colonial period, Koreans debated how to conceive of their nation using a wide range of approaches, including pan-Asianism, Darwinism, ethnic and civic nationalism, and internationalism. (Gi-Wook Shin argues that Korean ethnic nationalism was a response to both colonialism and communism.) Similar debates were occurring among Vietnamese anticolonial activists at the same time, although less visibly, given the French colony’s more restrictive political environment. These debates tended to be confined to a small circle of activists whose views also shifted over time. Phan Boi Chau’s writings, for example, combined pan-Asianism, Darwinism, and ethnic nationalism.

Pan-Asianism lost its allure after Japan colluded with France to expel Vietnamese students sent there for study. The anticolonial discourse eventually narrowed down to the rivalry between ethnic nationalism and internationalism. The narrative of ethnic nationalism drew from the Lac Long Quan-Au Co myth, from claims of Vietnam’s “4,000-year history of resistance to China,” and from a fear of racial extinction derived from Darwinism. Internationalists were not a monolithic group. Like some communists in Korea at the time, many Vietnamese Stalinists believed in class struggle but saw ethnic nationalism as a powerful force useful for the fight against colonialism. They were able to briefly cooperate with the more radical Trotskyists.
The shift in Comintern policy in 1935 enabled collaboration between Stalinists and non-communist nationalists until 1948. They founded the Viet Minh as a united front that used the language of ethnic nationalism to mobilize the masses.

In Korea post-1945 politics created two opposing regimes in North and South Korea. In the North, Kim Il-sung set up a socialist state with the support of the Soviet Union and China. In the South, Rhee Syngman (a former member of the Independence Club) became president of an anti-communist republic. Both North and South Korea sought to use ethnic nationalism to consolidate their states and regimes. Kim made it sound like his regime was pursuing not Stalinism but a unique socialism à la Korea. Rhee promoted the concept of “one people” to unite South Koreans against communism, which he once likened to a disease. In the early 1970s, following the Sino-Soviet conflict, Kim promoted the concept of *juche* (“one’s own identity,” often translated loosely as “political independence and self-reliance”; *chữ thế* in Vietnamese) as a guiding principle of the North Korean state, together with Marxist-Leninism. After seizing power in a 1961 coup, General Park Chung-hee of South Korea raised the slogan of “modernization of the fatherland” as the new doctrine of the state. This doctrine blended ethnic nationalism with anti-communism and developmentality.

Similar manipulations took place in Vietnam during the Cold War. Ethnic nationalism helped Stalinists to seize power in late 1945 and to lead the independence struggle with the significant cooperation of many nationalist groups determined to resist French return. While working with certain nationalists, Stalinists executed or sent into exile anti-communist nationalists (the Dai Viet party), Trotskyist internationalists (for example, Ta Thu Thau), and advocates for civic nationalism (for example, Pham Quynh, labeled as a “collaborator”).

At the onset of the Cold War in Europe, Vietnamese Stalinists responded enthusiastically to a Soviet call for the communist camp to challenge imperialism. They began to purge their government of non-communists and wholeheartedly embraced Maoism following the Chinese communist victory in 1949. A rural class struggle was launched in Vietnam during 1953–56 under Chinese supervision, and anti-Rightist and Great Leap Forward campaigns were similarly emulated (more briefly for the Leap). Nationalist struggles need not exclude class struggle; as General Secretary Truong Chinh of the Communist Party of Vietnam (CPV) said in an internal meeting in 1953, “Nationalist democratic revolutions are [essentially] peasant revolutions. Wars of national liberation are essentially peasant wars ... Leading peasants to fight feudalism and imperialism is class struggle and nationalist struggle at the same time. It is class struggle within a nationalist struggle and under the appearance of a nationalist struggle.”

It took some time for the communist leaders to formulate a slogan to link ethnic nationalism to socialism. In the late 1950s, they came up with the formula “to be patriotic is to build socialism,” making patriotism (a popular Vietnamese term for ethnic nationalism) serve socialism. When they decided on launching the war for reunification, internal party documents viewed it in Marxist-Leninist-Maoist doctrinal terms as a revolution to overthrow a neocolonial regime to establish communism in the entire country. In public, however, the war was framed as “the anti-American resistance to save the country.”

North Vietnamese propaganda used both internationalism and nationalism, though emphasizing the first over the second, at least up to the mid-1960s. During 1955–59, for example, the four most published authors in North Vietnam were Lenin (40 titles), Stalin (29 titles), Mao (12 titles), and Ho Chi Minh (11 titles). One out of every 100 copies of printed books was a work by Lenin. A Communist Party document on the broadcasting system, issued in 1959, defined that the system’s tasks were “to propagate and mobilize support for Party and state policies, to guide people in carrying out socialist revolution, to mobilize people in the whole country to struggle for reunification, to educate people about internationalism, to strengthen the international solidarity between our people and the socialist countries, and to strengthen the solidarity between our people and the other countries, especially those in Southeast Asia.”

An examination of the 1956 reading textbook for (typically six-year-old) first-grade students shows that 84 out of 328 lessons (25.6 percent) had political content. Among those 84 lessons, 32 percent taught students about (dead) communist military heroes, 19 percent about “Uncle Ho,” 10 percent about revolutionary and socialist life, and 7 percent each about the south, socialist-brother-countries (one about young Lenin), and peasants’ and workers’ lives. Only two out of 328 lessons were focused on general patriotism and one on a historical hero (Tran Quoc Toan), compared to two lessons on land reform alone. The contents of this textbook suggest that Vietnamese students were taught less about patriotism linking to Vietnamese history than about socialism and its international connections. In general, the party wanted youths to have a strong belief in socialist values and a willingness to die for the socialist cause if told to do so by “Uncle Ho” and the party.
In South Vietnam, which was a separate country during 1955–75, President Ngo Dinh Diem declared colonialism, feudalism, and communism to be the three main enemies of the Vietnamese nation. He promoted “personalism” (chủ nghĩa Nhân vi), a theory developed by the lay Catholic French philosopher Emmanuel Mounier, as a third force between the two Cold War blocs’ ideologies of liberalism and communism. Personalism aimed to protect and develop the dignity of the individual in contrast with liberalism (which offered false liberation) and with communism (which called for perpetual war). By adopting an alternative to two Cold War ideologies, Ngo wanted to assert an independent national spirit despite his regime’s dependence on the United States. However, cultural freedom in South Vietnam and the Ngo regime’s lack of control over the educational system imposed severe limits on its attempts to manipulate nationalism. By the 1960s direct American intervention in the war led to a large anti-American movement in South Vietnamese cities. This movement, which supported peace and reunification, was partly spontaneous and partly manipulated by North Vietnamese agents.

After reunification, the communist regime continued to mobilize ethnic nationalism in its war with China, which was portrayed as “chauvinist and hegemonistic.” While the war with China was carried out in “the defense of the socialist fatherland,” the invasion and occupation of Cambodia was for “the internationalist solidarity with the Kampuchea people.” Rather than stressing nationalism at the expense of communism as in the North Korean concept of juche, Vietnamese communists continued to make nationalism serve socialism, as evidenced in their identification of the national tasks as “construction of socialism and defense of the socialist fatherland.” By the early 1990s, North Korea had dropped Marxism–Leninism from its constitution, making juche, and at times “Kim Il-sungism,” the new doctrine. Parallel but more timid change occurred in Vietnam, where the thought of Ho Chi Minh was added to Marxism–Leninism as the ideology of the regime. Vietnam has thus far refused to drop Marxism–Leninism.

In South Korea anti-Americanism developed in the 1980s following the Kwangju massacre by the military dictatorship. A new ideology, Minjung (the oppressed masses; dân chúng in Vietnamese), which carried both Marxist and Christian connotations and conceptualized the masses as the core of the nation, guided the struggle for democratization until the late 1990s. The Minjung movement supported reunification with North Korea while opposing military rule, anti-communism, and the South Korean alliance with the United States. Led by a new generation of student activists, and thanks in part to the end of the Cold War, the movement achieved stunning success in
forcing the generals to democratize. The movement has since lost its steam, and left-of-center groups are now split between those fixated on reunification and North Korea, on the one hand, and those more focused on domestic issues such as labor rights, on the other.

Interestingly, parallel changes in social consciousness are taking place in Vietnam today, two decades after those in South Korea. Spontaneous anti-China sentiment has surged recently; anti-China protests occurred in 2008 and 2013, despite being suppressed by the government. Protesters charge that the Vietnamese government is cozying up to China at the expense of Vietnam's national interest. While still fragile, their emerging movement has begun to link intellectuals to lower social strata, and domestic dissidents to anti-communist Vietnamese in exile. This movement suggests that ethnic nationalism is now struggling to escape the patronization of communists. In this struggle, it is aided by a rising demand for democracy among many groups in Vietnam. Vietnam today is not the South Korea of the 1980s, though, since Vietnamese democratic aspirations must confront a far more powerful and entrenched state—which is our focus in the next section.

Evolution of the Modern State

The evolution of the modern state in both Korea and Vietnam began under colonial rule, yet Japanese colonial rule in Korea was far more transformative than French rule over Vietnam. Japan removed the monarchy and created a unified administration and economy in Korea. In contrast, the French were ambiguous about the colonial project and slow in creating a modern, unified administration of Indochina. In terms of the sheer number of residents and civil servants living in the colony and working for the colonial government, Japan maintained a presence in Korea ten times larger than France's in Indochina. A smaller but significant contrast is found in the ratio of police relative to population: the Japanese police force employed one for every 400 Koreans, whereas the French had only one for every 850 natives in Indochina.

Southern Vietnam was granted the status of a full colony, where French staffed the administration and natives enjoyed many rights similar to French nationals. The Vietnamese monarch continued to maintain nominal rule over central Vietnam (Annam) and (through a viceroy) over northern Vietnam (Tonkin). In both Annam and Tonkin, a French résident supérieur oversaw the Vietnamese administration, although after the 1900s Tonkin was placed under the direct authority of Indochina's French governor-general. By separating southern Vietnam from the rest, colonial rule reversed the unification process begun under the Nguyen Dynasty between 1800 and 1860.

Both France and Japan built modern infrastructure in the colonies, but, again, Japan did much more. France built a trans-Indochinese rail network of 1,550 kilometers, or about half the length of the network built in Korea by 1945. The motor road network in Korea was also twice the length of that in Indochina. In addition, Japan promoted industrialization and urbanization, while France did not. Manufacturing (including mining and timber) accounted for 40 percent of Korea's total domestic product in the early 1940s, while the ratio for Indochina was about 20 percent in 1937. More than 13 percent of the Korean population lived in cities (>20,000), with a working class numbering nearly 1.8 million, more than ten times the number in Indochina. By 1937 there were 2,300 Korean-run factories, of which 150 employed more than 50 workers. Japanese policy thus created a new stratum of Korean entrepreneurs who would contribute to postwar industrialization in South Korea. In contrast, the most significant French contribution was not in industry but in agriculture. The French built 2,600 kilometers of canals, dug through marshes in Cochin China; these resulted in a quadrupling of the cultivated area for rice, a ten-time increase in rice output, and a five-time increase in rice exports during the period 1880–1937. French policy created a sizeable landlord and middle class in Cochin China (many were ethnic Chinese), which contributed to the rapid development of commerce and capitalism in South Vietnam during the period 1954–75 (and today).

The politics of state formation from late 1945 up to the 1950s was more conducive to building a strong state in Korea than in Vietnam. In particular, Korean elites were polarized into two groups led by extremists (Rhee Syngman and Kim Il-sung). The American occupation forces, in cooperation with Japanese-trained Korean police, carried out massive suppression of communists in South Korea and helped its government to consolidate early on. In contrast, Vietnamese elites cooperated with one another in late 1945 to create a nationalist movement for independence. This compromise resulted in a weak state with a divided leadership. However, with the launch of the class struggle in 1953 and establishment of a Stalinist-Maoist regime in North Vietnam after 1954, this country quickly overtook South Korea in the task of state building.

Elsewhere I have shown that President Rhee (1948–1960) built an effective anti-communist state through his Japanese trained police. Prominent rivals such as Kim Ku and Yo Unhyong were reportedly assassinated by his agents. The National Security Law promulgated in 1948 (and still in force today) was designed to "prohibit all activities that aimed at subverting the state and denying private property" and "preventively detain" those deemed suspicious of
“being dangerous and possessing unsound thoughts.” In 1949 alone, nearly 120,000 persons were arrested, and 123 social groups were dissolved from September to October. Rhee implemented the Podo Yonmaeng program in 1948, which registered and monitored about 300,000 former communists and their families. During the Korean War, the South Korean government imprisoned and executed tens of thousands of suspected or real communists, while Kim Il-sung forces did the same with anti-communists. The early and systematic suppression of communists helped consolidate the South Korean state. The killings of southerners and destruction of the south by northern forces generated intense anti-communist sentiment in South Korean society.

The military dictatorship under Park Chung-hee (1961–79) greatly expanded the political surveillance of the population through such measures as resident registration and residential associations. Schools taught anti-communist thought in several courses. The populace was mobilized to participate in civil defense training in the 1970s. All young men were required to complete military service, which was a precondition for some kinds of employment. The regime maintained tight control over labor and labor organizations, especially during the Yushin period in the 1970s. When necessary, the military relied on force to suppress protests, as in the Kwangju massacre in 1980.

Turning to Vietnam, there is no question that the force of nationalism, whether springing from the bottom up or mobilized from the top down, contributed to the success of the Vietnamese communists in building a strong state. Their leadership in the war for independence from France allowed Vietnamese communists to be strongly associated with the nation in the eyes of many Vietnamese. The U.S. bombing of North Vietnam and the presence of U.S. troops in South Vietnam convinced many Vietnamese that their nation was under foreign threat. This helped Vietnamese communists gain popularity and mobilize popular support for their policy. Yet I argue that an equally important but often neglected factor is the Vietnamese communists’ use of overt violence, systematic coercion, and thorough indoctrination to generate compliance and loyalty to the state.

Capitalist South Korea was dictatorial and oppressive, but no match for communist Vietnam when it came to systematic violence, coercion, and control. To the Vietnamese communists armed with the class struggle theory, enemies were defined as entire social strata, not particular groups or individuals. As General Secretary Truong Chinh explained in 1948, enemies of the Vietnamese revolution included “counterrevolutionary feudal landlords and comprador bourgeoisie serving imperialism, and other traitors regardless of class backgrounds.” While peasants, urban petty bourgeoisie, intellectuals, “national bourgeoisie,” and “progressive personalities and landlords” were considered allies of the revolution at the time, he forewarned that “when the revolution makes further progress, the ranks of our enemies and allies will change, and we will have to change those relationships.” Truong Chinh’s words were not mere talk. On the eve of the land rent reduction campaign in 1953, communist leaders issued a decree authorizing the execution of landlords in a ratio of one for every 1,000 people. Not just political opponents but a percentage of the population as defined by the communist doctrine was marked in advance for extermination.

Systematic deployment of violence during the land reform of 1953–56 not only destroyed the social basis of potential opposition to the state, but also contributed specifically to state building. The first step was to launch a mass mobilization campaign to denounce and persecute the defined enemies. This step constituted several smaller tasks that involved the state bureaucracy throughout. One was to organize peasants’ associations acting on behalf of the party to mobilize mass participation. A parallel task was to orchestrate the direct and enthusiastic participation or at least complicity of the masses in the violence. This was accomplished through intense propaganda work aimed at legitimizing mass violence against the enemies. Through teams of cadres assigned to live with poor peasants, and through the ubiquitous public speaker system and newspaper-reading teams, the “violent crimes” of the enemies were told and retold in graphic detail, desensitizing people and preparing them for the upcoming violence.

After people had been sufficiently aroused, the next step was to orchestrate public shows of terror during which denunciations and executions of targeted enemies were carried out, often by their very neighbors, relatives, and friends who had been coaxed or coerced into doing so. The third big step was to distribute rewards to supporters and construct new structures of power in the countryside. Zealous participants in the violence were rewarded with material goods such as land and positions in the new local bureaucracy, the military and security forces, and the local mass organizations. (Families of executed enemies, by contrast, were made subject to lifetime state monitoring through the personal dossier system.) This step was crucial to state building because it formalized the auxiliary mass organizations and added a permanent layer of state control over the local population.

Implicit coercion and surveillance were also far more comprehensive and systematic in communist Vietnam than in South Korea. Most important in urban areas were the neighborhood groups (khu phó or tổ dân phố), community police officers (công an khu vực) assigned to monitor a certain number
of households, and the household registration system (ho khau). In the 1950s Vietnam created ho khau, modeled after the Chinese hukou and far more coercive than the Korean residential registration. Operated in combination with urban grain rationing and forced eviction from cities, ho khau maintained local police surveillance and controlled population movement between rural and urban areas and within urban areas. It bound people to their birthplaces, where the state could monitor them and their extended families. It served effectively as a tool to reward loyal subjects (who could keep their urban registration together with grain rations) and discipline disloyal ones (who were banished to the countryside forever).

The communist state not only maintained a political dictatorship but also attempted to turn most Vietnamese into state employees dependent on the state for jobs, food, and other necessities. Together with the nationalization of industry in 1958, North Vietnam launched the (forced) collectivization of agriculture and imposed a ban on private trade. Employment in the private sector became scarce, and most individuals came to earn a living by working for some state units. To be sure, the black market on rice, ration coupons, scarce industrial materials, and so on, was vibrant and helped those not employed in the state sector to survive on the margins of society. On the whole, however, most individuals owed their livelihood to the state and had a strong incentive to be obedient.

While rural cooperatives in Vietnam were small and did not contribute at all to the Vietnamese economy, they appeared more important as a tool of surveillance and control.45 In fact, they contributed decisively, if unexpectedly, to North Vietnam’s victory in the civil war. Working closely with local governments and army recruitment boards, cooperatives kept track of young men in each household and groomed them for as long as two years before they reached draft age.46 Cooperatives made draft avoidance almost impossible for young rural men, but they could guarantee soldiers that their families would be taken care of if they served. A common slogan at the time suggested cooperatives’ key political role: “Not a single kilogram of paddy short [of procurement quotas]; not a single soldier short [of recruitment quotas]” (thức không thiếu một cân; quân không thiếu một người). While cooperatives failed in motivating peasants to work hard for socialism, they made sure that villages surrendered to the communist state all able-bodied men needed for its war making (communist Vietnam lost about a million troops in the civil war between 1959 and 1975, out of a population of less than 20 million).

Communist Vietnam imposed strict control not only over politics and people’s livelihood, but also in the cultural realm. In particular, the party required the complete submission of culture to politics and the promotion of values associated with the working classes. Early on the CPV implemented the Maoist method of chéng fēng (or zhengfeng, literally “rectification,” an approach involving forced self-criticism in a group setting) with great success.47 State-controlled organizations were later formed to monitor and mobilize writers, artists, scholars, and other professionals. Writers whose works raised even vague doubts about socialist values or party policies would be swiftly and harshly punished. Public show trials in which dissidents were publicly scolded and shamed by their neighbors and colleagues were common (and are occasionally used today). Dissidents faced many other forms of punishment short of imprisonment, such as political and social ostracism, denial of food rations, a lifetime ban on publishing, harassment of family and friends, and banishment to the countryside.

By the mid-1950s, the government moved to nationalize private presses and media in North Vietnam (today Vietnam still allows no private newspapers and publishers). Media were organized as parts of the state bureaucracy and led by party organizations. Vietnamese were not just proscribed from reading unauthorized materials, but were forced to listen to what the state wanted them to hear. By 1957, 38 public address systems had been built to cover all towns and nearby rural areas. A CPV resolution issued by its Secretariat in 1959 ordered the extension of this system “further into the villages . . ., to produce small receivers that could tune into only our frequencies.”48 The public address system typically broadcast hourly and daily programs to every household within its range, whether people wanted to hear or not.

Education is ideally for enlightenment purposes, but in communist Vietnam (and, to a lesser extent, in anti-communist South Korea during its authoritarian period) it was primarily for indoctrination. Vietnamese schools became places to train future revolutionary heroes; “new socialist men and women” were nurtured from a very young age. The government not only banned private schools and textbooks, it also established Communist Party cells in each school—from elementary schools to colleges—to control faculty and students.

To sum up, in all areas, from politics to economy to culture, the North Vietnamese communist state ranked equal to North Korea, and far exceeded South Korea, in terms of its domination over society. After reunification, Vietnamese communist leaders sought to impose the entire Stalinist-Maoist socioeconomic system of North Vietnam upon the vanquished south despite the intense resistance of southerners. Not until the rise of Gorbachev and the subsequent collapse of the Soviet Bloc in the late 1980s did Hanoi abandon that
system. As a result of market reforms over the past two decades, state domination over society has weakened greatly. However, the Vietnamese Leviathan today remains more powerful than its South Korean counterpart, even when compared to the latter's heyday of military authoritarianism. While extreme by standards of authoritarianism in the developing world, the South Korean leaders Rhee and Park were subject to regular elections (Park won elections twice by small margins). Alliance with the United States required accepting certain religious freedoms. The press remained largely privately owned and relatively free in the late 1950s and the first decade of the Park regime. The state guided but did not control the economy, and rapid economic growth fostered the development of civil society. This is in contrast to the experiences of (North) Vietnam and North Korea, where the totalitarian mode of control stifled development in the long term, causing both countries to fail miserably. Yet state control in these two countries has survived numerous crises, while the South Korean state was forced to give up much control over society following democratization.

**Conclusion: Lessons of Vietnam’s Reunification for South Korea**

Vietnam and Korea are in the same neighborhood and have traveled broadly similar paths from ancient history to the modern era: they asserted independence within the cultural-political world dominated by China, were victims of colonialism, and suffered national division. Yet a closer look reveals important divergences. The most glaring difference is that Vietnam emerged from the Cold War united but poor, while Korea remained divided but with one half rich and democratic. The recent surge of nationalism in Vietnam can potentially make this country more like South Korea if this movement can overcome the resistance of the Vietnamese state, which ironically is more like North Korea in its character.

Does Vietnam’s reunification have lessons for South Korea? The answer is yes—although most involve what not to do. Essentially, Korea should avoid repeating Vietnam’s experience. The reunification of Vietnam was carried out by force and incurred staggering costs. Up to 3 million Vietnamese lives were lost on both sides. Economic and environmental costs, too, were enormous but have never been calculated. True, reunification brought a unified government, which is usually a benefit. In this case, however, reunification by force helped create a powerful and arrogant state that stifled society while pursuing a utopian vision that fostered national destitution and individual privations.

Meanwhile, Vietnam’s reunification never ushered in the expected national unity. The Saigon regime may have been less popular than its Hanoi rival, but it was not without its loyal followers. Millions of southern civilians fled Vietnam after the communist victory and during the first decade after reunification, with thousands of “boatpeople” losing their lives on the trip. Having achieved reunification by force, Hanoi leaders brushed aside calls for national unity and sent hundreds of thousands of Saigon loyalists to hard labor camps. Many were released from prison only in the early 1990s, after the United States made it a condition for diplomatic normalization with Vietnam. Relations between the Vietnamese government and overseas Vietnamese communities remain tense despite individual efforts to reconcile on both sides. Former (communist) prime minister Vo Van Kiet, whose wife and two children perished during the war, recently admitted on the anniversary of reunification that while the day brought joy to millions of Vietnamese, it brought sorrow to millions of other Vietnamese.

In retrospect, perhaps the largest benefit that reunification brought Vietnam was peace. After three decades of turmoil, peace was truly welcome, even for the losing side. Yet peace turned out to be illusory: Vietnam was back to war—this time with Cambodia and China—in a mere four years. Though one can certainly blame Vietnam’s neighbors for provoking it, Vietnam’s tangled relationships with both nations cannot be separated from Hanoi’s earlier manipulation of the Sino-Soviet rivalry and use of Cambodian territory for the Vietnamese revolution. Regardless of who is to be blamed, it is sadly ironic that a bloody war, waged in the name of reunification over two decades and costing 3 million casualties, bought only a short-lived peace. Why, it must be asked, should war have been waged in the first place?

The fate of Vietnam was shaped in part by the Korean War, not only because that war raised the stakes in Vietnam for the United States and deterred Stalin and Mao from supporting a similar war in Vietnam in the 1950s, but also because that war affected the calculations of North Vietnamese on how to conduct their own war for reunification. Rather than launching a frontal invasion across the demilitarized zone (DMZ) as North Korea did, North Vietnam chose to orchestrate a revolt in the south with the assistance of northern troops sent south by way of Laos and Cambodia. North Vietnam thus succeeded where North Korea failed. North Korea’s failure allowed the survival and eventual economic success of South Korea. North Vietnam’s military success led the country into a blind alley from which it has not yet fully emerged.

In short, the Vietnamese experience suggests that territorial and political reunification does not necessarily produce national unity. The goal of frustrated Korean patriots should be unity, not just reunification, however long it may take.
Notes

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4 See Donald W. Keiser's introductory chapter and also chapter 8 by Leif-Eric Easley for discussions of the concept of a middle power.

5 South Korean and South Vietnamese presidents Rhee Syngman and Ngo Dinh Diem also threatened to take their troops north to reunify their countries, but did not enact such aggressive policies as their northern rivals.


10 Seth, A History of Korea, chapter 9.


15 "Civic nationalism" is nationalism defined by common citizenship in a modern nation, as opposed to "ethnic nationalism," which is defined by shared ethnicity.


18 Ibid., 145.

19 This myth claimed that a dragon king and a fairy were the progenitors of the Vietnamese.

20 The Comintern reversed its earlier policy and ordered all communist parties in the colonies to form united fronts with nationalists in 1935.

21 Tuong Vu, Paths to Development in Asia: South Korea, Vietnam, China, and Indonesia (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010), chapter 8.


25 "Bao cao tua Tong Bi Thu Truong Chinh" [Report by General Secretary Truong Chinh], in Van Kien Dang Toan Tap 1933 (Complete collection of party documents) 14 (Hanoi: Chinh tri Quoc gia, 2000), 53–54.


27 Le Duan, "Duong loi ca chung mang nen Nam" [The revolutionary line in the South], August 1956, in Van Kien Dang Toan Tap 1956 (Complete collection of party documents) 17 (Hanoi: Chinh tri Quoc gia, 2002), 783–825.

28 Alec Holcombe, "Stalin, the Moscow Show Trials, and Contesting Vietnamese Visions of Communism in the Late 1930s" (paper presented at the Workshop on Revolutions in Vietnam, University of California, Berkeley, November 11–12, 2011), 41.

29 Minh Tran, "Nhung tac pham cua V. Lenin o nuoc ta" [V. Lenin's works (published in our country)], Hoc Tap, April 1960, 24–35.

30 "Nghi quyet cua Ban Bi Thu so 80-NQ/TW" [Secretariat resolution no 80-NQ/TW], July 14, 1959, in Van Kien Dang Toan Tap 1959 (Complete collection of party documents) 20 (Hanoi: Chinh tri Quoc gia, 2000).

31 Bo Giao Duc [Ministry of Education], Tap Doc Lop Mot [First grade reading textbook] (Hanoi: Ministry of Education, 1956). Only one reading textbook was used in the whole country.


34 Ngo Dinh Diem resisted direct U.S. intervention, but by then he had been overthrown by his generals, with Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) support.
37 Shin, Ethnic Nationalism in Korea, chapter 9.
41 Vu, Paths to Development in Asia.
42 Carter J. Eckert and Ki-baek Yi, Korea, Old and New: A History (Seoul: Ilchokak, 1990), 310; Brocheux and Hémery, Indochina, 135.
43 Seth, A History of Korea, 285; Brocheux and Hémery, Indochina, 135.
44 Brocheux and Hémery, Indochina, 122.
45 Vu, Paths to Development in Asia.
46 Ibid., chapter 2.
48 Under the conservative government of Lee Myung-bak, this law was more aggressively enforced. In 2010, 151 people were interrogated on suspicion of violating the National Security Law, up from 39 in 2007. The number of people prosecuted for pro-North Korean online activities increased from 5 in 2008 to 82 in 2010. The number of domestic Web sites shut down for pro-North Korean content rose from 18 in 2009 to 178 in 2011 (compared to about 300 Web sites shut down by the Vietnamese police in 2009). Choe Sang-Hun, “Sometimes It’s a Crime to Praise Pyongyang,” New York Times, January 5, 2012.
53 For an English translation of this decree, see Journal of Vietnamese Studies 5, no. 2 (Summer 2010). The actual number of executions is estimated to have been 15,000, or approximately 1/5,000 of North Vietnam’s population at the time. Vo Nhan Tri, Vietnam’s Economic Policy since 1975 (Singapore: ASEAN Economic Research Unit, Institute of Southeast Asian Studies 1990), 3.
55 Kinh Lich, Tuyen Quan Trong Lang Xa [Military recruitment in villages] (Hanoi: Quan Doi Nhan Dan, 1972). “Grooming” means inviting them to events related to recruitment and other youth activities in support of the front, and talking to them and to their parents about government expectations for their enlistment.
57 "Nghi quyet cua Ban Bi Thu so 80-NQ/TW."
58 Hong Yong-pyo, State Security and Regime Security: President Syngman Rhee and the Insecurity Dilemma in South Korea, 1953–60 (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1999), 130; Ogle, South Korea, 32.
59 Reunification of Vietnam was carried out by force. The lessons from Vietnam are perhaps more useful for North Korea since it is far more prone to taking this violent course of action than South Korea.